

CEDAR RAPIDS GAZETTE
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Information taint

Within a week of CIA Director Stansfield Turner's plug for journalists' helping the CIA as sideline spies, FBI Director William Webster has sent up an even stronger one for journalists' helping the FBI as marginal agents.

It is better, to be sure, that any such moonlighters would be siding with the good guys rather than the enemies or crooks. But the law-abiding public and the country will be much better served if duty-mixes such as these are never used. Reliable reporting as a service of the nation's self-disciplined press is incompatible with an activity that finds responsibility displaced from readers to an arm of government.

Particularly in the case of foreign correspondents serving U.S. readers from abroad, split functions of collecting news and government intelligence are both unworkable and dangerous.

If news receivers come to sense that anything they see may reach them through the hand of someone in the government's employ as well as his own publication's, what befalls the credibility of any news there? If news sources think a dual role perhaps is being played, what happens to the kind of confidence they place in the reporter? If officials in another country must assume U.S. newspeople may be working also for the CIA, what happens to all correspondents' safety when suspicion falls upon them? Can legitimate reporters anywhere be trusted in denying that they're spies?

When also, as Admiral Turner and Director Webster both suggested further, even the employer of double-duty corre-

spondent isn't necessarily aware of shared allegiance, then how can the employer protect endangered help? Or see to correspondents' safety in arrest or disappearance situations overseas?

Apart from any law or policy considerations in the matter, journalistic ethics rule against the plain dishonesty involved in serving masters other than the one forthrightly represented — the news profession. Nothing there prevents a patriotic individual from feeding certain information to officials of his country if it has a special usefulness aside from normal news. But doing that for pay systematically, at home or far away, breaks a trust, creates a sham and damages the deepest footings of a free press.

Admiral Turner insisted that no one now in U.S. journalism is engaged in CIA activity, though he had three times sanctioned unfulfilled relationships as rare exceptions to the norm. Director Webster said three people in the journalism field — "not necessarily news reporters" — are acting secretly as information channels for the FBI.

Whatever the substance of these news-linked deceptions, the mere impression that they can exist is far more harmful to the cause of reliable news than helpful to the cause of U.S. government intelligence. The agencies' two chiefs deserve applause for candor in explaining where things stand. But journalism's standards, correspondents' safety and the public's great entitlement to truth will all take a beating for as long as shadows of suspicion fall from double-dealing spooks in the background.